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View Towards Change: The United States-Republic of Korea Arms Trade Relationship Through the Post-Cold War

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In May 1998, Deputy Secretary of Defense John Hamre ordered an extensive review of the Pentagon's foreign military sales (FMS) process.¹ The impact of this review could result in the dismantling of an empire of bureaucracy that evolved during the Cold War. The review was brought on after complaints from senior officials and an apparent realization that the cumbersome FMS process, a legacy of Cold War-era US security assistance, was driving US allies to other suppliers of military goods and services who are willing to deal more flexibly. There is perhaps no better example that demonstrates the need to develop a more productive course in arms trade relations than that involving the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK).

Since the end of World War II, the ROK and the US have shared a strategically significant economic and military relationship marked by strong political ties and mutual amity. An important aspect of this relationship has been a steady stream of military hardware and assistance from the US. Military assistance and weapons sales from the US have served as a protective bulwark against North Korean communist aggression and as a facilitator of sustained economic growth and prosperity. However, the dissolution of the Soviet Union has ushered in a new era. For the ROK, supplier options have substantially increased since the collapse of Soviet communism and subsequent emergence of Russia as an international arms competitor. As a result, new markets have been created outside of the traditional US-ROK arms trade arrangement, and fresh opportunities have presented themselves to the ROK in the form of inexpensive weaponry and tempting transfers of technology.

The purpose of this article is to provide the reader with a detailed understanding of the US-ROK arms trade relationship. Through an understanding of this relationship, a reference for policy can be set and a productive course for future dealings with an important ally can be undertaken. In order to provide a clear understanding of the US-ROK arms trade relationship, the article will first introduce Korea. Following this introduction, a historical explanation of the evolution of the US-ROK relationship and the ROK defense industry will be provided. This explanation will culminate in a brief case study involving a major ROK offshore defense acquisition that embodies the beginning of a new era in the US-ROK arms trade relationship.

Korea: A Brief Background

As a nation, Korea has a long and unfortunate history of foreign domination and exploitation. A brief historical examination of attempts by foreign invaders to usurp Korea's sovereignty clearly illustrates a need for armed defense. A Korean proverb roughly translated as "The backs of shrimp break

when whales fight" describes the plight of Korea. Sandwiched tightly between what are today the People's Republic of China (PRC), Russia and Japan, Korea served for "thousands of years as a convergence point of surrounding powers, attracting covetous attention and periodic invasions."² Japan, the Mongols, the Manchus and China's Han, Liao, Yuan, Chin and Ch'ing dynasties had all invaded Korea at one point or another before the 20th century.^{3,4}

The 20th century has seen the nation of Korea fought over during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, annexed by Japan in 1910 and subsequently colonized until 1945. Although Korea was liberated by Russian and US forces in 1945, liberation was accompanied by immediate separation at the 38th Parallel into two halves. The two halves, North Korea and South Korea, have been pitted against each other, more or less, since 1945. Since the division of the Peninsula in 1945, there has been constant military tension between the North and South. At times, North Korea has "stepped up its military hostility through a series of bold provocations."⁵ Thus, in South Korea's case, the threat has been real, and the need to defend itself has been quite urgent at times.

Republic of Korea and the United States: Beginnings of a Strategic Relationship

On 15 August 1945, Colonels Dean Rusk (later to become Assistant Secretary of State for Far East Affairs, 1947-1960, and Secretary of State, 1961-1969) and Charles H. Bonesteel were ordered by the American War Department "to withdraw to [a room with a map] and find an appropriate place to divide Korea."^{6,7} It was shortly after the Japanese defeat in World War II that US military involvement began in Korea with the arrival of the US 7th, 40th and 6th Infantry Divisions at the Port of Inchon during the month of September 1945.⁸ The first mission carried out by US forces was to receive the Japanese surrender and create a South Korean internal security force. US General Order No. 1 called for the US to accept Japanese surrender in Korea south of the 38th Parallel and for the USSR to accept surrender north of it. The Soviets, who had arrived in Korea 1 week earlier went along with the terms of the order.

With the approval of General Courtney H. Hodge, the Commanding General of US Army Forces in Korea, the National Constabulary was established under the US military government in the area south of the 38th Parallel on 15 January 1946.^{9,10} The Constabulary served as the core nucleus from which the National Defense Forces were created on 15 August 1948 when the Government of the Republic of Korea was first inaugurated.¹¹

When war broke out on the Korean Peninsula on 25 June 1950,

ROK forces were ill-prepared. Poorly equipped and barely trained, ROK forces were initially caught off guard and nearly decimated by the North Korean onslaught. Within 2 weeks of the surprise attack, President Harry S. Truman authorized US air, naval and ground forces to intervene on the side of South Korea.¹² After 2 years of bitter negotiations and seesaw battles, “the UN Command finally managed to sign an armistice agreement with the communist side,” the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) and their ally, the People’s Republic of China, on 27 July 1953.¹³

The aftermath of the Korean War reestablished the 38th Parallel as the demarcation line dividing the communist-backed DPRK and US-supported ROK. Initially, ROK forces were completely dependent on the United States for all forms of military support:

Due to the lack of modern equipment and leadership . . . the ROK military required consistent assistance from the United States. The US Army transferred essential military items, vehicles, ammunition, fuel, and replacement parts and turned over all its inventory to the ROK Army after the war. Even supplies such as clothing and consumables were provided by the US military.¹⁴

In order to thwart further communist encroachment, the ROK would remain solely dependent on the United States for various forms of military assistance until the early 1970s.

Prompted by the Nixon Doctrine and the subsequent decision in December 1971 by the US to withdraw the 7th Infantry Division, the ROK Government proclaimed a *state of national emergency* and embarked on the development of an indigenous defense industry.¹⁵

Beginnings of the ROK Defense Industry

Weapons production for the ROK Army actually began in 1971, “when a memorandum of agreement between the US and the ROK authorized the Ministry of National Defense to construct a plant to assemble US-designed Colt M-16 rifles.”¹⁶ In 1973, the ROK Government enacted the Law on Military Supplies in which “various measures were taken to foster and support defense industries.”¹⁷ Steps included in the act were creation and operation of a support fund, provision of subsidies, taxation privileges, contractual favors and a defense fund-raising drive. Shortly after the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, the defense tax system was introduced to accelerate the development of domestic defense industries. By the mid-1970s, the ROK Government had “signed agreements to begin licensed production of many types of US-designed weapons, including grenades, mortars, mines, and recoilless rifles.”¹⁸ In addition, the ROK began to manufacture ammunition for the weapons it produced for the army.

In 1976, under the Korea Defense Industry Promotion Act, the ROK Government established the Korea Defense Industry Association for the purpose of promoting local manufacture of weapons.¹⁹ Since that time, Korean manufacturers have seized an ever-increasing portion of their defense pie.

The ROK’s pursuit of domestic production continued to develop throughout the 1970s. In 1978, the ROK “successfully developed missiles and multi-firing rockets.”²⁰

Also in that year, preparations were completed for the indigenous production of M-48A3 and M-48A5 tanks. The 1980s brought closer military ties with the US, and the ROK was able to focus comfortably on conventional weapons

improvement and expanded research and development. A South Korean-built destroyer, the *Ulsan-ham*, was put into service in March 1980. In 1982, the year in which the Second Force Modernization Program was launched, the ROK began producing F-5F fighter-bombers in a joint venture with the US contractor Northrop.

“By 1990, ROK army contracts were being awarded to South Korean companies to produce tanks, self-propelled and towed field guns, armored vehicles, and helicopters.”²¹ These contracts included indigenous production by Hyundai of the 88 Tank, formerly the K-1 (the K-1 was a joint US-ROK design). The contracts also included co-production activities, as in the co-production of H-76 helicopters by the Sikorsky Aircraft Corporation and the South Korean firm Daewoo.

The 1990s brought less ROK dependence on the United States for defense support and assistance. The bilateral and multilateral defense agreements that defined the parameters of the Cold War underwent tremendous change. In an effort to diplomatically envelop North Korea, the ROK initiated diplomatic normalization with the PRC and the Soviet Union in 1989 and 1990, respectively. The collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 brought an end to the Cold War bipolar framework. No longer constrained by years of traditional bipolar arrangements and treaties, the ROK found itself in a better position to view internal weapons development and procurement issues with a sharper focus on their own national interests.

Unlike Europe, however, the 1990s have not shown signs of a qualitative transformation in the bilateral military alliance structures in Northeast Asia. The US is maintaining a constant force structure in Japan and the ROK despite rapprochement with the PRC and Russia. It is the potential for change in these bilateral alliances (between the US and its Northeast Asian allies) that is “forcing each country in the region to rethink its own requirements for ensuring security and promoting national interest.”²²

The ROK in the Post-Cold War

In its *ROK Policy on National Defense*, distributed through the Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Washington DC, the ROK has recognized the need for close military cooperation between “neighboring countries to maintain the perception of regional stability and peace.”²³ Unthinkable a decade before, the 1990s have seen the ROK begin intermilitary exchange and cooperation with Japan, the PRC and Russia. In a move to build confidence in a budding ROK-Japan military relationship, the ROK executed a Letter on the Prevention of Accidents Between Korean and Japanese Military Airplanes effective 5 June 1995. During the Russian defense minister’s visit to the ROK in May 1995, the two countries signed agreements and a memorandum of understanding on military exchange for 1996-97 signifying that the *two nations*’ military relationship has entered the phase of practical cooperation. After the ROK set up a defense attaché office in the South Korean Embassy in Beijing in December 1993, the PRC followed with an office in the Chinese Embassy in Seoul in 1994. At a senior working-level officials meeting held in February 1995, the two countries agreed to gradually expand military exchanges in the future. The ROK has clearly demonstrated its desire to more independently determine the direction of its military policies.

From the perspective of arms sales and transfer of weapons

technology, the US-ROK relationship is at an important juncture, caught up in the complex and rapidly changing geopolitical environment that is currently shaping the world. For many years, the ROK and the US shared a common goal of thwarting communist expansionist plans; the US in a global context, and the ROK in a more focused, regional context. The ROK's commitment to deter North Korean attack parlayed into a larger and, because of the nuclear question, more menacing global conflict between the US and Soviet Union. Considering this and the pace at which the ROK was developing its own indigenous defense industry, reliance on US weapons and technology by the ROK was a given.

The end of the Cold War lessened the overarching potential for global conflict between the US and Soviet Union, at a point when, for the first time in recent history, the ROK was being taken seriously by its regional neighbors as an economic power. This was vividly portrayed in 1990, when Seoul agreed to lend the ailing, former Soviet Union \$3B in cash and goods. After giving the Russians \$1.47B, the ROK halted further disbursement in 1992 when Moscow failed to meet interests payments.²⁴

Meanwhile, in 1993, "Russia set up its state-owned military marketing corporation, Moscow-based Rosvoorouzhenie," and began targeting the countries of the Far East and Southeast Asia.²⁵ By 1994, Russia had made itself a significant supplier of equipment and weapons to the ROK.

Since 1994, Seoul has purchased about \$250M in tanks, armored personnel carriers and weaponry in an arms-for-debt barter deal with Russia. This arrangement has spurred the chagrin of US Government and industry officials who emphasize the need for interoperability between the allies on the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, South Korean Air Force officials said they would include Russian SU-35 and SU-37 fighter aircraft in their estimated \$9B FX next generation fighter competition.²⁶

As a way to recoup the overdue Russian debt, the ROK agreed in 1995 to accept Russian defense equipment.²⁷ Initially, the ROK agreed to receive about half of a \$457M overdue installment that came due in 1993 in the form of weapons, with the other half in raw materials and civilian helicopters.²⁸ Pavel Fitin, deputy head of the South Korean department in Russia's foreign Economic Relations Ministry, spoke on the issue, saying that the agreement signed by the two countries on 10 July 1995, "is completely satisfactory for the Russian side [however] . . . we'll do our best to increase the arms share in [future] agreements."²⁹

The Case of the SAM-X Project

On 8 October 1997, in an apparent effort to lessen public fear over a potential North Korean Scud missile attack, ROK Air Force (ROKAF) Chief of Staff Lee Kwang-hak announced the ROKAF would establish an early warning alarm system by December of the same year. He also stated he was aggressively promoting the introduction of short-distance radar bases and a next-generation surface-to-air missile defense system, known as the SAM-X project.³⁰ In order to achieve this capability, the ROK would have to either develop it indigenously or turn to the international arms market and select an appropriate arms contractor.

The ROK announcement of the SAM-X came on the heels

of a major blunder in executing the nation's air-raid warning system. On 23 May 1996, a North Korean pilot defected to the South in his MiG-19. As the fighter was tracked nearing the DMZ, air-raid sirens wailed in all the appropriate towns and cities, except Seoul, South Korea's capital. Evidently, the director of the warning center responsible for Seoul had ordered the system shut down a year before because of faulty operations. The mayor of Seoul publicly apologized for the incident, and prosecutors immediately sought the arrest of those thought responsible for the deed.³¹ Shortly thereafter, in September 1996, a North Korean submarine slipped into South Korean territorial waters undetected and accidentally ran aground. For 49 days, North Korean commandos who had infiltrated South Korea via the submarine ran amuck, prompting a massive manhunt. Seventeen South Koreans died in the ordeal, while ROK military and police managed to kill 13 commandos and capture 1.³² A few months later, the most significant North Korean defector to have ever fled to the ROK, Hwang Jang Yop, would tell of a vast network of North Korean spies in the South and that North Korea had nuclear and chemical weapons capable of *scorching* the South.³³ For these reasons, considerable pressure began mounting on the ROK Government regarding the country's system of defense. Although the North Korean ballistic threat had been around since the late 1980s and a possible nuclear threat was known by the early 1990s, it was not until 1997 that South Korea formally announced plans for the SAM-X project. Apparently, the ROK had been counting on developing an indigenous SAM capability to deal with the North Korean threat. However, after a series of security breaches occurred in South Korea, the ROK Government took more aggressive steps to quell mounting fears. The announcement of the SAM-X project appears to have been one of those steps.

The case of the SAM-X project represents a watershed event in the US-ROK arms trade that highlights the ROK's desire to wield independent discretion in its defense acquisition policy. The project requires a sophisticated state-of-the-art missile defense system, the likes of which the ROK would have to purchase from an offshore supplier. Raytheon's Patriot PAC2 missile system had already been introduced to the ROK in 1994 under the control of the US Eighth Army as a way to protect US forces stationed in South Korea at a time when tensions and rhetoric were particularly heightened on the Korean Peninsula. This put Raytheon in what one would think to be a favorable position to deal directly with ROKAF and ROK Government officials with the hopes of concluding a major weapons sale. At the same time, however, Russia had been eyeing the potential sale as an opportunity to pay off its remaining debt to the ROK. Through their state-run weapons export company, Russia offered their S-300V ground-based air defense system.³⁴ When the ROK entertained the option of either going with the Russian system or the US-made Patriots, controversy erupted. Unlike the past, the US was now a *contender* for an estimated \$1B contract for a weapons system in the ROK. When asked about the issue during a trip to Asia, US Defense Secretary William Cohen voiced apparent opposition, warning that a decision in favor of the Russian system ". . . would not play well in Congress at all." He added, "It would not be a good deal, I think, overall ultimately for our relationship. It's important that they [the ROK] stay with US equipment."³⁵ Russian response to this

was defensive and accusatory. After noting that a contract in Russia's favor would be a good method to pay back some of Russia's overdue debt to the ROK, the Russian ambassador to the ROK, George F. Kunadze, accused Secretary Cohen of "bullying a customer into buying merchandise."³⁶ Although Secretary Cohen's remarks were arguably rooted in concerns regarding interoperability issues, they were politicized nonetheless by both the ROK and Russia as remarks intended to discourage the ROK from concluding this particular arms deal with the Russians.

Immediate public reaction in the ROK appeared to side with the Russians. ROK Government officials, acutely aware of the importance of public opinion in an increasingly democratic South Korea, seemed caught between public sentiment and foreign diplomacy. As of this writing, the ROK Government is withholding a decision as to which system to purchase. The decision that the recently elected government of Kim Dae-Jung makes on the issue could potentially change the course of a long-standing and stable defense relationship dominated by US doctrine, strategy, leadership and technology. Regardless of the ROK Government's ultimate decision, a markedly changed US-ROK relationship has emerged with regard to the arms trade.

Conclusion: Rethinking the Arms Trade Relationship in the Post-Cold War

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and subsequent end of the Cold War has drastically changed the structure of the international arms market. The most glaring aspect of the SAM-X case is that it involves dealings between parties that only a decade ago would have been unimaginable. The notion of the ROK snubbing the United States and turning to Russia for a major arms deal would have been, indeed, unthinkable. However, the end of the Cold War has allowed countries to openly engage Russia. During the Cold War, economic dealings with the Soviets, especially the purchase of weapons, would have signaled an ideological shift and an almost certain swift and harsh response from the United States. Russia, unlike before, is now a viable source of weapons for the ROK to consider when making an offshore purchase. It is also a debtor country to the ROK that has pushed the idea of repaying its debt in the form of weapons and weapons technology transfer. Thus, unlike the loyalties that were built up during the Cold War, the post-Cold War period has brought with it the opportunity for the ROK to think beyond the US-ROK relationship and begin planning for its future in Northeast Asia. Issues such as reunification with North Korea, trade relations with the PRC and military exchanges and cooperation with Japan, Russia and the PRC have taken on great significance in the ROK.

The bilateral mechanisms developed during the Cold War on the Korean Peninsula are still in place, but the respective goals pursued by the US and ROK no longer fit the Cold War scheme. The ROK may have national plans that no longer fit into the bilateral framework that evolved during the Cold War. The case of the SAM-X shows that ROK leaders have responded to ROK public opinion, risked offending the United States and put their national agenda ahead of US-ROK relations.

For these reasons, the classic supplier-recipient relationship is no longer a viable framework from which to view the relationship. The relationship shared by the US and

the ROK vis-a-vis weapons procurement can be characterized as one that has taken on more of a customer-supplier orientation. The ROK now behaves much like the customer who shops in an unrestricted market looking for the best product at the best price. With the Cold War over and traditional bilateral arrangements no longer available to fall back on, the US must aggressively seek ways to promote sales and stay in business, much like the merchant. If the US desires to maintain a continued competitive edge in the ROK arms market, greater attempts at win-win arrangements are likely to be necessary. Efforts by the US Government to ease the FMS bureaucracy as directed by Deputy Secretary of Defense Hamre may be the essential first steps required to allow this to happen.

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